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ABSTRACT

The employability of secondary-level youth is considered by a youth employment company official in testimony to the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Attention is directed to ways in which young people, and particularly the economically disadvantaged, can acquire the necessary reading, writing, and math skills for on-the-job success. Educating youth in life skills, work habits, and positive attitudes for productive employment is also addressed. The work of 70001 Ltd, a youth employment company that helps high school dropouts overcome educational and employment barriers, is described, and the following conclusions based on the company's experiences are offered: young people learn better if they understand why the material is important to them; people of all ages will perform in accordance to expectations set for them; people will perform best when they feel they are making a contribution; although jobs require increasingly sophisticated skills, employers are willing to train people who demonstrate good work habits and attitudes; the concept of public/private partnership is a working reality; and the federal government has an important role to play in efforts to link education to higher productivity. (SW)

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TESTIMONY OF LARRY BROWN
President
70001 Ltd. - The Youth Employment Company

September 16, 1982

BEFORE:

The National Commission on Excellence in Education
Denver, Colorado

Anne Campbell, Chair

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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TESTIMONY OF LARRY BROWN

Chairwoman Campbell, members of the Commission, I am Larry Brown, President of 70001 Ltd. - The Youth Employment Company. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

There is an almost unquestioned belief in America that performance on-the-job is in some way determined by how much and how well we have been educated. But as yet, no magic formula has been developed which will tell us with precision the impact of education on productivity.

Our daily experiences are not much help either. On the one hand, we encourage and reward those young people who do well in school. But as most employers will tell you, the best students do not always make the best employees. Too many other factors such as attitudes, expectations -- even race and sex -- enter into the equation.

Perhaps this lack of precision is due to the broad scope of the concepts embodied in the words "education" and "productivity." Education, in its broadest sense, encompasses the range of human experience, formal and informal. And productivity is far more than a simple measure of the number of widgets a worker can produce in an hour.

In discussing the employability of secondary-age youth, I would like to focus on two aspects of education and their relationship with two aspects of productivity. On the education side, I would like to address the ways in which young people, the economically disadvantaged in

particular, can and must acquire the necessary reading, writing and math skills for on-the-job success. It is equally important, however, to educate youth in life skills, work habits and positive attitudes for productive employment. In 70001's experience, these facets of education are two halves of an inseparable whole.

As American's declining productivity indicates, there is a cost to the individual and society of our failure to help our youth attain employability. It is represented by zero or even negative productivity. A more familiar aspect of this problem, a worker's on-the-job output, must also be examined in our discussion today, especially as it relates to young people to young people just entering the labor market.

70001 is in a unique position to comment on the link between education and productivity. For more than a decade, we have been helping young high school dropouts overcome the educational and employment barriers that prevent them from becoming productive citizens. The unemployed high school dropouts in our 40 programs across the nation are almost universally believed to be part of America's productivity problem, certainly, not part of it solution. Among the over 25,000 young people we have served, most are age 18 or younger, from minority groups and female. Almost one-third are parents of at least one child and 7 percent have more than one. Over 30 percent are from families in which neither parent completed high school. Eighty percent read below a ninth-grade level and one-third have never held a job; few have had any job beyond two months.

These high school dropouts and the thousands of prospective dropouts in our classrooms today are the potential bedrock of a permanent underclass of citizens who could remain without significant work for the rest of their lives. Whether you consider their education or their employability, these young people are in the very worst position to compete for the shrinking number of semi-skilled, entry-level jobs.

70001 has proved, however, that even these most disadvantaged youth need not be written off. During the past six years, 70001 has placed more than 16,000 young dropouts with private employers. These youth were hired solely on the strength of newly-acquired skills and without employer incentives. Furthermore, these youth, among the most unmotivated and least skilled, participated in 70001's pre-employment training program without the benefit of wages or allowances, and more than 80 percent of the young dropouts who complete their training are placed, usually within two weeks, into private, unsubsidized jobs.

70001's experience convinces us that young people do want to work and will participate in training without being paid to do so. 70001 has shown again and again that employers will hire job-ready youth who possess the work habits and attitudes necessary to become productive employees.

Pre-employment skills and positive work habits are not enough, of course. A solid foundation of reading, writing and math skills is vital not only to success on the job, but in life as well. From a productivity standpoint, it is incumbent upon all of us to make sure the nation's

educational system produces graduates who possess the basic academic skills necessary to strengthen the economy.

But we are still faced with a serious and growing problem of youth who leave school without these skills. Many of the young people who seek 70001's assistance are unable to read a job application, much less a blueprint or instruction manual. To be functionally illiterate in today's complex society is a staggering handicap, one which afflicts an estimated 20 percent of all adults.

70001's comprehensive educational program is provided on site and all enrollees are encouraged to study for and pass their high school equivalency exams. Scholarships are available to those who earn their GEDs and wish to enter post-secondary education. This emphasis on education is so pronounced, in fact, that a majority of enrollees refer to 70001 as a "school" rather than a job training program.

Why do high school dropouts respond so well to 70001's educational program? First of all, it is important to keep in mind that young people rarely leave school because they lack the brain-power to learn. The vast majority are of average or higher intelligence. Their reasons for dropping out range from simple boredom to pregnancy. Some are from troubled homes and many have substance-abuse problems. More than a few have undiagnosed learning disabilities.

In other words, the learning capacity is there. The key is to devise an educational program flexible enough to meet the needs of young people whose previous learning experiences have been so negative.

70001's GED program is self-paced, making use of small group and individual instruction. For those who lack even the skills required to prepare for the GED, 70001 offers a competency-based curriculum and an adult basic education program. A formal recognition system rewards publicly those students who do well but does not chastise those who learn more slowly.

Local staff provide intensive counseling when needed to help participants overcome personal barriers. Classes are often held after normal business hours so that participants are not tempted to give up their educations for the more immediate gratification of a paycheck, and we often "conspire" with employers, once our Associates are hired, to provide incentives for continued education.

Above all, however, 70001 stresses to participants that the "three Rs" are vital tools to career success, that a high school diploma or its equivalent is only a passport. Because most of the young people in 70001 have seen for themselves the dearth of opportunities available for dropouts with limited educations, this message rarely falls on deaf ears.

But there is more to making youth employable than a thorough grounding in the basic academic skills. Many people, no matter how well educated, enter the world of work with unrealistic expectations, negative attitudes, and no real sense of direction. 70001 couples its instruction in the academic disciplines with programmed activities that teach young people what the world and employers expect of them. These activities -- and they range from civic involvement to simulated work

settings to comparison-shopping trips -- also build self-confidence and self-respect.

It is impossible to overstate their importance of these latter two factors. Young dropouts come standard equipped with self-images only a notch or two above zero. They are well-prepared for failure and perform as expected. In fact, they are tremendously successful at being failures.

It takes an enormous effort to overcome these deeply ingrained patterns of failure. Even the best-designed education and training program can be dragged down by the self-fulfilling attitudes of participants.

When you get right down to it, attitude is the key ingredient to insuring a higher level of education and productivity, not only for the young, but for all Americans.

Attitude development can no longer be ignored. Just as 70001 builds opportunities for success and lessons about failure into all its activities, our national institutions must do the same. Schools must lavish praise not only on the merit scholars and athletes, but also on students who achieve often more difficult personal goals and objectives. Only when youth have a chance to recognize and test their own self-worth and feel they have a contribution to make will they be productive workers.

Let me talk a bit more about the issue of productivity. I mentioned earlier that it is an often difficult concept to define and measure. But it is easy to understand the crippling loss of productivity that occurs when people are unemployed. The nearly 11 million Americans who are now out of work represent tremendous productive capacity. Not only is this capacity not being utilized, the money being paid out in jobless benefits and welfare is money not being spent to recapitalize our industries.

One of 70001's basic strengths is our ability to help young dropouts get off the welfare rolls and onto payrolls. An independent study published this summer by the U.S. Department of Labor showed that 70001 can place young dropouts into paying jobs quickly. Those still in pre-employment training, and even many of those who are working, also volunteer many hours of their time in service to their communities through the Seventy Thousand One Career Association. Instead of consuming scarce public funds, these young people are helping contribute to America's economic revival. The same study also documented that young dropouts in 70001 pay back the entire cost of the program with their increased on-the-job wages in just over one year.

The employers 70001 deal with, however, are much more concerned with the immediate productivity of individuals once they are on the job. It is here that 70001 has focused its efforts over the years to develop a work-readiness program to boost the productivity of new labor market entrants, especially those from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds. With the benefit of 70001's intensive pre-employment training program,

young high school dropouts with no previous work experience begin jobs knowing what to expect and what is expected of them. They are conscientious about absenteeism and are less likely to quit over a minor problem.

According to the Labor Department study, 30 percent of the employers who hire through 70001 judged our young people as performing better than their co-workers on a variety of criteria. That equals productivity and profits and is a major reason why employers in 16 states have come to rely upon 70001 as a source of truly job-ready employees.

Our success with pre-employment training for dropouts suggests strongly that a similar program would be of great benefit to all young people, and even a good number of adults. The Vice Chairman of our Board of Directors, Mr. Bill Brooks of General Motors, tells a story that illustrates this point. In 1977, when the auto industry was healthier than it is today, General Motors hired 9,000 entry-level workers in one year to keep just 1,500 job slots filled. These jobs payed an average of more than $8 an hour. The executives of GM were plagued by the cost of lost productivity resulting from such high turnover. After doing some research, GM discovered that most of the people who applied for these jobs -- whether dropouts or high school graduates, from disadvantaged or middle class backgrounds -- simply had no idea of what was expected of them on the job. Eventually, GM joined with 70001 and three other Detroit-based corporations to create a pre-employment training center that in the past three years has prepared more than 4,000 young people for the world of work. Graduates of the Detroit

Pre-Employment Training Center have been hired by more than 350 companies.

In its 13 years of experience, 70001 has learned a number of lessons about how to link education and training with on-the-job productivity. Let me summarize a few of these briefly:

1. Young people will learn better and faster if they understand why the material is important to them. Relevance need not always be in terms of job-hunting success, but it must be in terms young people know and understand.

2. People of all ages will perform pretty much in accordance with the expectations you set for them. Make young people believe they will fail and they will. Give them realistic expectations of success and they will succeed. This is such a rickety old cliche that its message has lost much of its impact. Yet it is a key reason for 70001's success and has a great deal to do with Japan's pre-eminence in world competition.

3. People will perform best when they feel they are making a contribution. We all like to believe our presence on earth makes a difference to someone, somewhere. Young people, especially, are searching for a constructive role to play. Dr. Richard Green of Rutgers University once listed three conditions he said were absolutely necessary to work

satisfaction. First, a worker must have a specific job to do. Second, there must be at least one other person around to say "Good job!". Finally, the worker must in some way feel he or she is making a difference. That may sound simplistic, but these three points closely parallel 70001's educational and programmatic design.

4. Although jobs require increasingly sophisticated skills, employers are willing to train people who demonstrate good work habits and attitudes. This is especially true for young people. The Labor Department found little resistance among employers to hiring youth from disadvantaged backgrounds who are enrolled in quality employment training programs. Only one in a hundred firms refused to hire youth through 70001 because of bad experiences with other jobs programs.

5. The concept of public/private partnership is more than a desirable goal, it is already a working reality. Schools, employers, government agencies, and other organizations are working together in many communities across the nation to solve mutual problems and achieve shared goals. 70001 is proud to be involved in what we believe to be some of the most innovative employment training partnerships anywhere. When responsibilities are clearly defined and turf issues dealt with openly, public and private institutions can do a great deal together to improve the quality of education and raise the level of productivity. It is time to stop talking about

all the reasons these partnerships cannot work and take a closer look at those that do.

6. The federal government has an important role to play in any effort to link education to higher productivity. Many of the most effective school-to-work projects in the nation -- including those involving 70001 -- have come about with the stimulation of full or partial funding from the federal government. I have spent the last three months visiting with executives of many of the largest corporations in America, and I am convinced that the private sector cannot and will not provide all the resources necessary to train the economically disadvantaged for productive careers. However, they will share the cost of programs that are more than mere income transfers; programs that are well-designed and well-run and that quickly repay their costs in terms of lower unemployment and higher productivity.

Finally, I have one specific recommendation. If you consider nothing else I have said to be of import, I ask you to seriously consider this. For too many years, those of us who work in the field of employment training and those of us who work in formal education have labored in separate vineyards. Until we set aside our differences as well as our criticisms of one another, the young people we wish to serve will not benefit from our expertise.

My experience in Washington as President of 70001 and Chairman of the Legislative Task Force of the National Youth Employment Coalition has continually put me across the table from representatives of the educational professions. Too often, we cannot or will not agree on what we recommend or what will work toward in the design of employment training policy for this nation.

Our differences are rarely large. But our distrust and our parochialism stand as the greatest barriers for people like me to become better educators and people like you to become better trainers of young employees.

As the Commission on Excellence in Education, I implore you to bring us together; whether it takes an iron fist or a velvet glove, we have much to learn from each other.

If you will work to help professional educators become more willing to recognize the success that many community-based organizations and alternative schools have achieved in putting young people to work, I pledge that I will marshall the member agencies of the National Youth Employment Coalition to recognize that we have much to learn from you about how we can better educate the young peoplw with whom we work.

Thank You